

# A DESIGNER'S 'PROVOCATIONS' THRIVE

BY JENNY CHE

**FOUR YEARS AGO**, the designer Thomas Heatherwick set out to create a building that represented a nation.

Mr. Heatherwick was designing the British pavilion at the World Expo in Shanghai. His solution: the Seed Cathedral, a 65-foot-high box structure made of protruding rods, which contained more than 250,000 seeds and nodded to the growing role of nature in British cities. The structure won the Expo's top award for pavilion design and remains a defining project of Heatherwick Studio, whose first North American museum exhibit opens at the **Nasher** Sculpture Gallery in Dallas on Saturday.

The 44-year-old Mr. Heatherwick, who also designed the Olympic caldron for the 2012 Games and a bridge in London that curls back onto itself to let boats pass through, calls his questions "provocations" ("How do you make a building represent a nation?" for example). They trigger a problem-solving approach to his various design projects, from furniture and Longchamp zip handbags to large-scale public works, said exhibit curator Brooke Hodge.

Though Mr. Heatherwick didn't formally train as an architect (he studied design at Manchester Polytechnic and the Royal College of Art in the U.K.), "he has this ability to imagine things spatially," said Ms. Hodge, who first encountered the work of Mr. Heatherwick's studio some 10 years ago. She is now the deputy director at the new Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum in New York City, where the exhibition will make its final stop next June after a stint at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, beginning next February.

The exhibit, which includes prototypes and photos of more than 40 built and unbuilt projects, comes at a time when Mr. Heatherwick may soon see greater recognition in the U.S.. He is working on the focal piece for a plaza in the Hudson Yards, a development on Manhattan's West Side.

Ms. Hodge likened Mr. Heatherwick's approach to that of early 20th-century architects. "Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier...designed things other than buildings," Ms. Hodge said.

The Nasher exhibit includes a rod from the Seed Cathedral as well as objects that inspired the designer, such as commercial shipping rope, which is reflected in the architecture of a London hospital. Weirdly shaped rock candy sparked an interest in creating distorted furniture pieces.



Mr. Heatherwick's work doesn't come "in a consistent form" or style, said Nick Tobier, a professor at the University of Michigan's Stamps School of Art and Design. He added that a commission from Frank Gehry, for example, would have his signature undulating curves, while a Heatherwick cafe in Sussex refers instead to the coastal landscape.

Many of Mr. Heatherwick's building projects are guided by qualities that he found in smaller objects by artists. "It felt to me that there was a simple absence of invention sometimes," he said in an interview. "I suppose I've been bringing together sensibilities that I didn't see in the large-scale world of building design, and that's what excites me. It's rooted in problem-solving."

## **One source of inspiration: weirdly shaped rock candy.**



Iwan Baan

**A NEW BUS FOR LONDON** designed by the Heatherwick Studio.